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POLYGRAPH EXPANSION COULD POSE LARGE PROBLEMS
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WASHINGTON

Recent spy cases have pushed a proposal halfway through Congress that could force the Pentagon to hire a battalion of polygraph operators and could cast doubt on the loyalty of thousands of innocent Americans.

Word of the Walker family spy case in which four men are charged with selling Navy secrets to the Soviets echoed around the House floor on June 26 when House members adopted, 333-71, a potentially sweeping polygraph program for the Defense Department.

But the Senate voted to authorize only an additional year for the Pentagon to complete 3,500 polygraph exams in a security screening test program. Later this month, House-Senate conferees will choose one version or a compromise.

On the House floor, opponents attributed the successful proposal by Rep. C.W. Bill Young, R-Fla., to "hysteria" spawned by the Walker case, but strong feelings are typically engendered by the polygraph.

Some polygraph operators call it a science; opponents call it a modern version of the Salem witch trials. Federal courts will not accept its results as evidence, and many professionals, including Attorney General Edwin Meese III and FBI Director William H. Webster, urge caution in the use of it and the claims made for it.

Its utility for identifying spies among large groups of people not already under suspicion remains very much open to debate.

No one can say exactly how many people the Young proposal would strap to a polygraph, and his legislation has no timetable for tests nor any money to pay for more operators or machines. But it goes well beyond a Reagan administration order that Congress, in a different mood, blocked last year.

That order contemplated 16,000 additional tests a year at the Pentagon with a start-up cost of $3.9 million plus $2 million a year. Congress insisted on the 3,500-exam test program first.

Young's bill requires random polygraphing for every civilian or military Pentagon employee and defense contractor with clearance to see "special access" information. There is no exact count of "special access" clearances but at the Pentagon alone they number more than 100,000.

Young also would allow random tests on any of the 4.3 million Pentagon and contractor employees with any security clearance.

But the Pentagon has only 152 polygraph operators. In 1983, they were able to give 18,000 tests. To complete 100,000 extra tests would require nearly six years if the operators dropped all other polygraph work. To do 100,000 more in one year would require hiring more than 800 polygraph operators _ about the size of an Army battalion.

But the Army polygraph school at Fort McClellan, Ala., can only graduate 50 polygraph operators a year.

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Meanwhile, the test results would be open to challenge. Last year, Norman Ainslie, head of National Security Agency polygraphing, told Congress that laboratory tests, on average, found the machine correct 93.6 percent of the time. But that means 6,400 out of every 100,000 people tested would be falsely suspected.

And David Raskin, a polygraph operator and University of Utah psychology professor, told Congress the machine's errors rise sharply when most of those tested are innocent, as would be the case at the Pentagon.

Raskin said up to 2,000 people might be falsely identified as deceptive in as few as 10,000 polygraph tests, necessitating expensive field investigations to resolve doubts. In 100,000 tests, suspicion could falsely be cast on as many as 20,000 people.

At the National Security Agency, 71 out of 1,770 employees tested in 1983 gave "suspicious" answers. After second and third polygraph tests and 30 additional investigations and evaluations, all were cleared of spying.

Two weeks ago, Meese avoided taking a stand on the Young proposal.

"Polygraphs can be useful in criminal investigations and in personnel screening, but you have to be careful not to overevaluate it," Meese said. "It's not a panacea and it's not a lie detector, as some people call it."

The machine measures how fast a person's heart is beating, how much the person is sweating and other physiological changes. The theory is that these signs change involuntarily when one is lying and that a trained operator can determine which changes stem from the stress of lying.

The Soviets, however, maintain a school to train communist agents how to beat the box.

On the House floor, Rep. Jack Brooks, D-Texas, pointed out that Karl Koecher, a CIA employee charged last year with spying for Czechoslovakia, passed CIA polygraphs when he worked there and an FBI polygraph during the investigation of him.

Contrary to a published report that a polygraph snared CIA clerk Susan Scranage, charged this month with spying for Ghana, government sources say suspicion of her developed from something she said or did during a standard debriefing before she was put on the machine.

Late last month, the Pentagon said that during the past three years the machine was the major factor in uncovering 22 security risks, including 15 persons who spied, knew spies or were recruited to spy. But in some cases, those individuals were suspected before the machine was used.

After nearly two years of study, Webster is still reviewing whether the FBI should adopt the CIA and National Security Agency practice of random tests for intelligence agents not otherwise under suspicion.

Nevertheless, some House members echoed former President Nixon's view of the polygraph as a deterrent. Said Nixon in a 1971 tape-recorded White House conversation: "I don't know how accurate they are, but I do know that they'll scare the hell out of people."

To this thinking, Brooks responded: "If this polygraph thing were worth a cotton-picking thing, the wife of every congressman in this place would buy one."